

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 17, 2006

Mr. Thomas F. Gimble
Principle Deputy Inspector General
Department of Defense Inspector General
400 Army Navy Drive (Room 801)
Arlington, VA 22202-4704

Dear Mr. Gimble,

This letter reflects my deep concern about a recent series of articles published in the *Hartford Courant* detailing case-studies of servicemen that were deployed overseas despite manifesting strong signs of mental illness. I am asking that you conduct an investigation into the military's current practices for conducting mental health screenings with deploying servicemen and women. Through Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests and over 100 interviews, the *Courant* identified 11 service members who committed suicide in 2004 and 2005 after being kept in Iraq and Afghanistan despite repeated signs of psychological disorders prior to, and during, deployment in combat zones. I am concerned that the military's current procedures for screening those being deployed and systematically referring them for evaluations and treatment are not meeting the health needs of our servicemen and women.

I am aware of the extreme pressures our servicemen and women are under in Iraq and Afghanistan and that many exhibit signs of distress and discomfort on a daily basis. I also know that the military healthcare providers, supervisors, and peers are important sources of information in determining when an individual needs additional support and psychological intervention. However, the articles in the *Hartford Courant* detailed numerous case examples of soldiers who had long histories of serious mental illness, such as bipolar disorder and who resided in institutional settings, who were deployed into combat situations.

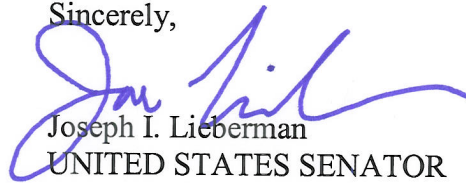
The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1998 (PL 105-85, Sect. 765), required the military to conduct an "assessment of mental health" for all deploying troops. The assessment currently being used is a single mental health question on a pre-deployment form filled out by service members. However, only 6.5% of those indicating mental health problems were referred for mental health evaluations from March 2003 to October 2005. Unfortunately, the army has also seen a resurgence in its suicide rate with rates of 20 per 100,000 deployed in Iraq. In the general US population, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that there are 11 deaths per 100,000 Americans. Clearly, our soldiers are experiencing unusually high levels of stress, but if the military is

PAGE 2

doing an inadequate job of assessing the severity of mental health problems in those deploying, and then placing them in further danger, their lives are at even greater risk.

I believe that it is essential for you to conduct a complete investigation of the military's current practices in screening those that are being deployed and redeployed so that military leadership and Congress can ascertain whether or not practices and protocols require revision. As a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, I believe this analysis will provide information necessary to conduct appropriate oversight functions. I appreciate your attention to this matter and look forward to a prompt response.

Sincerely,



Joseph I. Lieberman
UNITED STATES SENATOR